

Using sites for insights

how historical locations can help teachers and students with the new history GCSE

Working alongside local history teachers to prepare for the new GCSE specifications Steve Illingworth and Emma Manners were struck that many teachers were concerned about two issues in particular: the breadth and depth of knowledge demanded and new forms of assessment, especially the historic environment paper. In this article they show how both these concerns might be tackled by going *beyond* the requirements of the exam.

Drawing upon work undertaken as part of a joint project between Edge Hill University and the National Trust they suggest four different approaches to incorporating a study of an historic site into a GCSE course.

By thinking more broadly about the opportunities presented by a study of an historic site to enrich pupils' wider period knowledge their approaches transcend the specific requirements of any particular examination rubric, ultimately serving to build both the knowledge *and* the skills pupils need to succeed in the exam.

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I have taught Henry VIII to Year 8 for 15 years and I have never heard of the Amicable Grant.¹ It is obviously not just the students who will need to know much more detail for the new GCSE – so will I, if I am going to teach this topic.

This was said by a history subject leader at a local network meeting in January 2016 looking at a specification for the new history GCSE.² The prompt for his comment was a new GCSE unit on Henry VIII but he and other teachers might well have felt the same way about units on Norman England and the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. These topics are so often taught at Key Stage 3 that many experienced history teachers might feel that they have developed a fair degree of expertise – until, that is, they see the new GCSE specifications and realise that the same topics at Key Stage 4 are going to be much more demanding, especially in respect of the depth of knowledge required. It was not surprising that the main outcome from this local network meeting for history teachers was a plan to develop mutual support in preparing for topics that had not usually been taught at Key Stage 4 before.

To help address this issue, this article will look at the topics of the English Reformation under Henry VIII and the reign of Elizabeth I with the aim of considering the greater depth of knowledge and sophistication of understanding needed at GCSE, particularly when compared to how these topics are typically taught at Key Stage 3. Specifically, we will consider how historical sites can play an important role in enhancing the knowledge, understanding and techniques needed for success at GCSE. Although the sites discussed here relate to the sixteenth century and are situated in northern England, the principles behind the ideas in the article are easily transferable to different historical periods and to sites in other parts of the country. It will be argued that historical sites can make a substantial contribution to the needs of students and teachers in this respect, whether through actual visits to the sites or through related resources used in the classroom. The materials and ideas shared in the article are based on a project currently being undertaken jointly by Edge Hill University and two key National Trust sites, Fountains Abbey in North Yorkshire and Little Moreton Hall in Cheshire (see Figure 1 for background details on these sites).

Approaches to studying historical sites

This article will explore four different approaches to using historical sites to help students and teachers with preparation for the new GCSE (see Figure 2). Two of these approaches (Methods 1 and 4) deal specifically with preparation for the historic environment element of the GCSE specifications, in which students answer examination questions about a particular site. Historical sites can however support GCSE preparation in a much broader way. Methods 2 and 3 are designed to help teachers and students develop a wider and deeper understanding of the period in question, in this case the Reformation, but the methods could be applied to different periods and topics. Figure 2 summarises the aims and approaches of each method.

Figure 1: Background to Fountains Abbey and Little Moreton Hall

Fountains Abbey



Fountains Abbey is a Cistercian monastery founded in the twelfth century in the North Yorkshire countryside. The abbey became very wealthy. It was dissolved by Henry VIII in the sixteenth century but extensive remains were left behind, which subsequently became the focus for the Georgian water gardens. The abbey and the gardens are a World Heritage Site.

Little Moreton Hall



Little Moreton Hall is a manor house built in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries by the Moreton family, large landowners in the Cheshire area. Particular noteworthy features are the long gallery and the use of over 30,000 panes of glass.

The value of engaging with historical sites

There is a real value for GCSE students and teachers in engaging with interesting historical sites, beyond the requirement to answer questions on the 'historic environment' element of the examination. The benefits of this engagement with historical sites have been argued by many history teachers. We believe that there are strong pedagogical reasons both for actual site visits and for studying sites in the classroom, supporting not only students' GCSE preparation but also their wider education.

The value of a site visit underpins Methods 1 and 3 (summarised in Figure 2). It has been suggested that students will remember and understand much more about a topic from the multi-sensory experience of a real visit than they would from studying it in class alone. Helen Snelson cites one of her students saying after a visit to a site, 'I understood before, but not like this', neatly summing up the immense value of actually being present at a place where significant events have happened.³ Elsewhere Snelson explains how a site visit can be 'a holistic experience, giving students the opportunity to enjoy the discipline of history and "join the dots" of its component parts.'⁴ Visiting a site would provide a powerful visual experience, as well as stimulating the senses in other ways too.

A growing number of history educators have recently published work exploring approaches to building effective

long-term memory in students, often with the demands of the new GCSE in mind. Michael Fordham for example has used research in the area of cognitive psychology to explore the value of certain techniques. One of these techniques is 'dual coding', whereby learners are presented with information in the form of both words and visual images.⁵ Nick Dennis has also drawn on developments in cognitive psychology to explain the importance to history students of 'learning in images' to help them build up effective long-term memory.⁶ A possible implication of the work of cognitive psychologists is the value of a site visit in helping students to develop strong visual images associated with their historical learning as an effective means of helping information to stick in students' minds.⁷

Another advantage of visiting a historical location is that the presentation of the site can provide a 'real' interpretation of a historical place, period or event. This can be far more powerful than an artificially contrived interpretation made up by textbook authors or by the teacher in the classroom. Andrew Wrenn makes this point in an account of a visit to a range of war memorials on the Western Front, where aspects of the presentation of the memorial site stimulated a spontaneous debate among the students. Wrenn comments that 'the issue of interpretation had been brought into sharp focus; not as a dry discussion but as a live issue.'⁸ In our exploration of Fountains Abbey as a site the interpretation provided by a panel in the exhibition serves as a good example of this type of 'real' interpretation, allowing the teacher to motivate students with the idea of challenging

the viewpoint of the 'expert' who has written the panel (see Figure 4). Rachel Foster and Kath Goudie echo the experience of many teachers when they say that 'our pupils relish the opportunity to show that their teachers, or their textbooks, provide only partial answers.'⁹ The same principle applies to pointing out the possible shortcomings of the 'answers' given by exhibition panels at museums and sites. Interpretations will be a key aspect of the new GCSE, so historical sites can play a very useful role in making this concept more real and accessible to students.¹⁰

Practicalities may make a site visit very difficult in some cases, so this article aims to explore approaches to both visiting a site and studying a site more remotely. Even if an actual site cannot be visited, we would argue that there is a lot of value in studying a specific location in depth to inform the wider picture of the whole topic. This approach resonates with another idea advocated by many history teachers that time spent on depth studies is a very effective investment in terms of the dividends gained in deeper knowledge and understanding of a wider topic. As Dale Banham has argued convincingly, approaching a topic through a detailed depth study gives students a better 'feel for the period' and makes general themes less 'abstract'.¹¹ Michael Riley has also emphasised the need to 'blend outline and depth within and across enquiries in order to create more profound understanding'.¹² With reference to the sites mentioned in this article, a detailed study of Fountains Abbey provides excellent insight into more general issues connected with the topic of Henry VIII and the English Reformation, such as the motivation for the dissolution of the monasteries. Similarly, an exploration of the motivation of the Moreton family in creating their ostentatious mansion can help students to understand the aims and ambitions of the Elizabethan gentry as a whole.

There are also major advantages to studying a site that is local to the students, as other history teachers have explained. Dan Moorhouse for instance shows how using a site in the area where students live 'ties local history in with national and international politics and makes it more accessible by presenting it through local places that students can relate to and identify with'.¹³ This principle underpins Method 4 of our approach (see Figure 2), in which students use a local site both as 'practice' and to motivate them by enabling them to make a connection to their own locality. Taking this further, David Waters celebrates 'the value of local studies of a particular place, not simply in terms of their potential to engage students, but in illuminating broader national narratives'.¹⁴ This is a key feature of Method 3 (see Figure 2), in which Fountains Abbey is used to tell the wider story of the dissolution of the monasteries. Across the country, other sites tell a story about different historical developments. In these ways, local site studies can help students move smoothly from the specific to the general and from the concrete to the abstract.

An examination of each of the proposed methods

We will now offer a more detailed explanation of the four methods outlined in the table (Figure 2). There is a particular focus on Methods 2, 3 and 4 as they provide wider insights

and less obvious approaches than Method 1, which has the sole aim of preparing students for a specific site visit.

Method 1: studying a site chosen by the school for the examination

Only the OCR B specification offers schools the chance to choose their own site for the historic environment component of the history GCSE.¹⁵ This is likely to be an attractive choice for many history teachers who will welcome the chance to choose a site they know well and which is easily accessible for a visit. It is still likely however that a substantial number of schools will study a specification in which the site is designated by the examination board. This article will therefore concentrate mainly on outlining a wider range of ways in which sites can support pupils' historical learning at GCSE. The sections on Methods 2, 3 and 4 explain and exemplify these approaches.

Method 2: classroom study of materials associated with a site

Historical sites can provide a wide range of rich and stimulating material in the form of contemporary written sources, photographs, artefacts and later interpretations such as guidebooks and interpretative panels in exhibitions. These materials can be excellent resources for teaching students vital skills and techniques in the classroom. A good example of this is a pack produced by the learning officer at Fountains Abbey (see Figure 1 for background information on the abbey) where historical sources derived from the abbey have been used to help students enhance their understanding of GCSE examination-style questions and of the techniques required to tackle these questions effectively. In the pack examples of questions from all the major specifications have been examined, looking at the types of answers required and then similar questions have been devised based on the particular historical context and sources from Fountains Abbey.¹⁶ History teachers and learning officers at other historical sites could do something similar for an interesting location in their own area. The examples from Fountains Abbey (see Figure 3) show a suggested approach for an exercise of this kind.

This approach supports the learning of students in two important ways. First, the stimulating written and visual source material provides valuable insights into the importance of monasteries (a central feature of both national politics and everyday life in the sixteenth century) and the possible reasons for their dissolution. In this way the story of Fountains Abbey provides a depth study that exemplifies and illuminates a more general overview.¹⁷

Focusing on one particular location is especially valuable if it is revisited at different points during the course, so that students gain a degree of familiarity with the site and how it developed over time. For example students might look at photographs and plans of Fountains Abbey (see Figure 3a) and extracts from the Rule of St Benedict to help them understand the importance of religious belief in the high Middle Ages. They then might return to a study of Fountains Abbey and look at sources relating to the wool trade and land holdings (see Figure 3b) to discuss the economic importance of the monasteries in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. When these students come to study the reasons for the

Figure 2: Different methods for using historical sites to support GCSE learning

How a site can contribute to the learning	Explanation of the method	Example of the method	Which element of the GCSE specification is enhanced?	Is a visit to the site required?
Method 1 Studying a site chosen by the school for the examination	For the OCR B specification, schools can choose their own site for the historic environment section of the examination	A visit to a site chosen by the school	Historic environment	Yes
Method 2 Classroom study of materials based on a site	Primary and secondary source materials from sites can be used in the classroom to deepen understanding of historical periods	Guidebooks from National Trust sites Letters and accounts written by contemporaries from various sites Photographs of sites	Any element of the GCSE course	Preferable but not essential
Method 3 Visiting a site to learn about a topic	A topic or section of a topic for GCSE can be taught through a visit to a site	A visit to Fountains Abbey can be used to teach about the depth studies of Henry VIII and his ministers (Edexcel) or The English Reformation (OCR A)	Any element of the GCSE course	Yes
Method 4 Practice site	Some specifications designate a site to be studied for a particular topic. Schools may wish their students to have a 'practice' on a different site that is more local to the school.	Little Moreton Hall in Cheshire can be a good 'practice site' for Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire (Elizabethan England unit for AQA)	Historic environment	Preferable but not essential

dissolution of the monasteries, they will be able to turn to the visitation report and the architectural evidence (see Figures 3c and 3d) having a familiarity with 'their' Abbey which will facilitate understanding of this complex historical change.¹⁸

Second, the approach helps students to understand better and practise the techniques required for answering a range of different examination questions. Two examples might help illustrate this point:

i) Ofqual GCSE History Assessment Objective 2: Historical significance in context¹⁹

By asking questions about the significance of a particular site, students can make judgements of their own based on contemporary evidence. For example, 'how significant was the Black Death in contributing to the decline of Fountains Abbey in the later fourteenth century?'

ii) Ofqual GCSE History Assessment Objective 4: Historical Interpretation²⁰

One of the key aspects of this AO is that students must have knowledge and understanding of both the period which is being interpreted and also, critically, the period in which the interpretation was created. Historical sites lend themselves particularly well to this challenge both because the modern, current interpretation of the site is explicit and visible, and because interpretations from earlier periods are also often evident.

At Fountains Abbey for example the current interpretation offered in the guide book or in on-site panels can be contrasted with the way the abbey was presented in the Georgian water garden. The eighteenth-century engraving (shown in Figure 3e) shows the extent to which the abbey was presented in the context of the designed pleasure gardens as a picturesque garden adornment. The Georgian period also saw the construction of a wholly anachronistic gazebo within the abbey church to allow better views of the nave and the valley and also of a 'Gothic grotto' in the Infirmary (no longer standing). This period also saw the turfing of the abbey's interiors, and the planting of shrubs and flowers in the cloister. For the Georgian owners of the estate, influenced by the idealised landscapes of Capability Brown, the abbey became, to some extent, another 'folly' and view in a garden full of designed follies and stunning 'reveals', such as the 'Surprise View' depicted in Figure 3e. In contrast to modern images, which often aim to show an accurate historical reconstruction of the Abbey, there are no Georgian images featuring monks or any other features of the abbey as a living community. Students can contrast this Georgian presentation with the modern presentation and discuss the reasons behind the differences. This is a very visual and easily understood approach to historical interpretations with which, in our experience, students engage very readily – one recent GCSE group had a lively debate about the relative merits of the two interpretative approaches – the Georgian and the modern.²¹

Regardless of the periods studied at GCSE, the rich materials found in many historical sites can be used in stimulating ways to support students' GCSE preparations in the classroom.

Method 3: visiting a site to learn about a topic

When planning a site visit history teachers might find it helpful to work closely with learning officers from historical sites to produce a session that can help students better understand key aspects of a unit they are studying. The example given here is a session currently being developed by learning officers at Fountains Abbey to help GCSE students and their teachers with their study of the Reformation of the English Church, a topic included in both the Edexcel and OCR A specifications.²² The goal of this session is to support students with their understanding of the unit in general, not just aspects specific to the historic environment.

In this example, students would be offered an interpretation of the dissolution of the monasteries and then spend their time on site compiling evidence to either support or challenge that interpretation. In the Porter's Lodge, an interpretative room on the Fountains Abbey site, the panels lean quite strongly towards an interpretation that Henry VIII and his commissioners had purely financial motives for closing the monasteries. This is a viewpoint that can be explored and challenged. There is lots of investigating that students can do on site to find evidence to support or question this view (see Figure 4). Related to this is the question of whether the monks at Fountains Abbey were living up to monastic ideals – in other words, was Henry justified in closing this monastery and others for alleged poor behaviour? Again, the site gives several clues to this, mainly suggesting that the Fountains Abbey monks were actually upholding high ideals. Based on the original purpose of the abbey and the fact that Henry VIII used many of the proceeds from the dissolution to build up his navy, a possible title for this session will be 'From worship to warship'.

There are two main aims behind this method. One is to develop deeper knowledge of the period, particularly about the motivation of the English government in closing the monasteries and about the nature of monastic life at the time. Another aim is to enhance pupils' development of the skills involved in addressing this type of examination question, where students are asked to support or challenge an interpretative statement. We believe that the authenticity of this particular interpretation – in the sense of being actually derived from the abbey's exhibition, rather than one contrived for the sake of providing a biased viewpoint – will help students to understand more clearly the nature of interpretations and how and why they are produced.²³ Whether done at Fountains Abbey or elsewhere, this approach of developing deeper insights into a topic through a session at an historical site would be a valuable learning experience for GCSE history students.

Method 4: using a 'Practice' site

Most of the GCSE history examination specifications nominate a particular site to be studied for the historic environment aspect of the course.²⁴ Where the site is designated by the examination board in this way, the specification makes it clear that there is no need to visit the site. However, it can be argued that seeing a site in reality is much more meaningful than reading about it or even experiencing 'virtual tours' online, providing a wider range of stimuli to the senses and making visual and auditory

Figure 3: Extracts from the Fountains Abbey learning pack

A – Photograph of the nave



B – Wool trade accounts

Extract from the Bursar's Books, Fountains Abbey 1457-58. This short extract gives an idea of the extent of the economic activity on the monastic estate.

*Of wool sold. Of best wool sold 4 sacks and 15 ½ stones, £13.5s.3d
Of medium wool 24 1½ stones, 40s.4d.
Of black wool 1 sack and 2 ½ stones, 24s.11d
Of grey wool (blank)
Of refuse (blank)
Of locks 10 stones, 7s.9d.
Total sacks, 7 sacks and ½ stone.
Total (£16.8s.6d) £16.17s.3d.)
Of sheepskin sold, 38s.2d*

C – Visitation report

The Visitation 1536: Letter from Dr Layton and Dr Legh to Thomas Cromwell, describing their inspection of Fountains Abbey, 20 January 1536.

The abbot of Fountains has so greatly dilapidated this house, wasted their woods, notoriously keeping 6 whores, one day denying these articles with many more, the next day confessing, thus manifestly incurring perjury. Six days before our access to this monastery he committed theft and sacrilege, confessing the same. At midnight he caused his chaplain to steal the sexton's keys and take out a jewel, a cross of gold with stones. One Warren, a goldsmith of the Cheap, was with him in his chamber at that hour, and there they stole out a great emerald with a ruby. The said Warren made the abbot believe the ruby to be but a garnet, and so for that he paid nothing for the emerald but £20...

D – Photograph of the ruins of the abbey



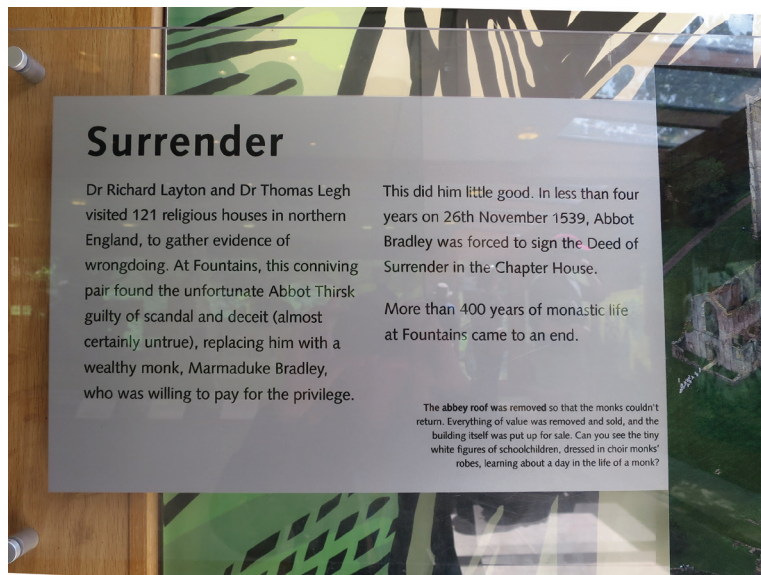
E – Picture of the 'Surprise View'



Figure 4: From worship to warship

Proposed investigation activity for a visit to Fountains Abbey

A panel in the exhibition at Fountains Abbey says '*Henry instructed Commissioners to report on the wealth and religious merit of each monastery, with a view to closing them down... Much of the wealth went to pay for his warships.*' Another panel describes Layton and Legh, the commissioners who investigated Fountains Abbey, as '*this conniving pair*', implying that they were deliberately distorting the evidence to fit the purposes of the king (see pictures of the panels below).



Overall enquiry question for an investigation during the visit

Does a study of Fountains Abbey support this historical view that the closure of the monasteries was motivated mainly by financial reasons?

What the investigation could include

On a visit, students investigate the following questions to help them answer the overall enquiry question:

- How much of the original abbey was destroyed and taken away to be used for other purposes? Students compare the remains to artists' drawings of the original structure. What proportion of the stone is missing? What else is missing (lead, gold etc)?
- Who benefited economically from the closure of Fountains Abbey? Students investigate the king's use of the monasteries' wealth to expand his navy and pay for wars, Richard Gresham's purchase of the site and its assets, and the use of the abbey's stone by local people.
- How wealthy was Fountains Abbey? Students investigate using documents as well as a visit to the Mill and to the impressive Huby Tower (see Figure 5), built in around 1500.
- Were the monks living up to their ideals? (In other words, would Henry VIII have had any justification for closing the monastery on grounds of poor behaviour?) Students investigate questions including: were the monks cut off from the outside world on this site? Are there signs of luxury? (There is only one room with a fireplace [the warming room]); other aspects of the site that could be used to address the question of comfort/discomfort include the abbot's house and the infirmary buildings.) Did the monks spend more time making money than praying? (Lay brothers did most of the business/manual work up to the Black Death of 1348 but afterwards the work was done by the choir monks.) Was the building of Huby Tower a sign of devotion to God or vanity on the part of Abbot Huby? How important was worship within the building?

connections in the mind. Yet such a visit can be impractical if the designated site is a long distance from the school. So it can be useful for students to visit, or at least base some classroom work on, a more local site that will be better known to them.

This method pertains to the idea of preparing history GCSE students for the questions on the designated site by practising their skills on a study of a similar site that may be more local and accessible. For the AQA depth study 'Elizabethan England c.1568 to 1603' the designated site for the 2018 examination is Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire.²⁵ In this case, Little Moreton Hall in Cheshire (see Figure 1 for background information) could act as a suitable place for this kind of exercise.

A learning pack has been produced as a joint project between Little Moreton Hall and Edge Hill University, mainly consisting of images from the hall, explanations of these images and questions based on the AQA GCSE specification.²⁶ The specimen papers for the AQA history GCSE have questions on these lines:

(A statement is provided)

How far does a study of (designated site) support this statement?

Explain your answer.

You should refer to (designated site) and your contextual knowledge.

One statement provided on the AQA specimen papers is:

'The main reason for building a stately home in Elizabethan times was to demonstrate the successful career of its owner.'

The theme here is how rich people's houses in Elizabethan times were designed to display the owners' wealth and success. The ideas and resources that follow (see Figure 6) explore this theme with regard to Little Moreton Hall. A question in the learning pack follows a similar theme to the model on the specimen paper discussed above:

The official guidebook to Little Moreton Hall says that 'This was a house that was built to impress.' What evidence is there that Little Moreton Hall was designed to impress people rather than simply be a functional place to live?

Figure 6 shows a sample of some of the materials from the learning pack that would help students to answer this question. In the pack, some learning activities are recommended as preparation for the main extended answer. First, students can match pictures of the features of Little Moreton Hall to written captions explaining what the picture shows. More able students could be given some extra pictures where they have to provide their own captions, as an extra challenge. Second, students would then arrange the pictures into a visual hierarchy, either in a linear way or as

Figure 5: Huby's Tower, Fountains Abbey



a pyramid or diamond shape, to show which pictures they think Elizabethans would have found the most impressive and the least impressive. Once this visual structure is in place, the pictures arranged in front of them would help students to plan their extended answer to the question above, as they can see clearly the evidence for and against the statement.

A question of this nature, looking at the claim that Elizabethan manor houses were built to impress, is likely to appear on the final examination, looking at a different site (Hardwick Hall in 2018) but the basic principles and techniques behind the approach pupils are taught to tackling the question are transferable. They can develop this technique on the 'practice' site, preparing them for a question on the nominated site. Another transferable aspect for students would be the understanding of some of the terminology associated with manor houses from this period, such as 'long gallery' and 'gentry', along with an understanding of the role and purpose of key design features common to these houses, such as elaborate chimneys, bay windows and decorative timbers. The people and events at Hardwick Hall and Little Moreton Hall may have been different but students can gain an excellent transferable understanding of question techniques, terminology and architectural features.

Students can either use the Little Moreton Hall pack in class or can visit the hall itself. A visit is strongly recommended, as the idea behind this suggested approach is that schools find an appropriate local site to work with as 'practice'

Figure 6: Images of Little Moreton Hall included in the learning pack



Lots of decorative timbers, using more wood than is needed to support the house. The house has 30,000 leaded panes of glass. Glass was an expensive, luxury item at the time.



Long gallery – built narrow to make it look even longer. Long galleries were very fashionable in the sixteenth century.

for the particular historic environment designated by the examination board. Schools could apply the principles behind the Little Moreton Hall pack to a suitable site in their locality. Even if a visit is still not possible, we would suggest that learning about a place closer to home can provide extra familiarity and resonance with students.²⁷

Conclusion

It is hoped that the ideas outlined here will give teachers greater confidence with approaching topics that are perhaps less familiar at the level of GCSE and help learning officers at the sites themselves to consider different ways they can support preparation for the new examinations. The examples from Fountains Abbey show how learning materials from a historical site can help students engage with the requirements of examination questions and how a well-planned site visit can provide insights into the general themes and issues surrounding a topic. The Little Moreton Hall example shows how a local site can be used as preparation for a study of a nationally-designated location. Using these exemplars, it is hoped that schools and historical sites can work together effectively in localities throughout the country in ways that will benefit students, teachers and the historical sites themselves. As well as helping with preparation for the new GCSEs, we think that such an approach can provide stimulating and enriching learning experiences in their own right.

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- ¹⁷ Banham, *op.cit.* and Riley, *op.cit.*
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ Ofqual, *op.cit.*
- ²⁰ Ofqual, *op.cit.*
- ²¹ Wrenn, *op.cit.*
- ²² Edexcel, *op.cit.*; AQA, *op.cit.*; OCR A, *op.cit.*; Eduqas, *op.cit.*
- ²³ Wrenn, *op.cit.*
- ²⁴ 'For example, see the Edexcel specification, p. 2 and pp. 7-16 - <http://qualifications.pearson.com/en/qualifications/edexcel-gcse/history-2016.html>'
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